

COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS OF THE VIVALDI BASSOON CONCERTO IN C MAJOR,  
RV 477, AND THE WEBER CONCERTO IN F MAJOR, OP. 75

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF MUSIC

BY

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MAY 2016

# **Comparison and Analysis of the Vivaldi Bassoon Concerto in C major, RV 477, and the Weber Concerto in F major, op. 75**

Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) composed many works for orchestra and for solo instruments. His Bassoon Concerto in C major, RV 477 is one of the more popular concerti in the bassoon repertoire. This concerto has gained much popularity partly due to the way it showcases the bassoon's specific qualities and the challenges it presents to the performer. German composer Carl Maria von Weber's (1786-1826) Bassoon Concerto in F major, op. 75 is an early Romantic piece, presenting stark contrasts from the bassoon concerti of Vivaldi. Weber's concerto, like those of Vivaldi, showcases the bassoon's technical capacity and presents several challenges for the performer, but places more emphasis melodic writing. This paper discusses the structure and technical nuances of the German-system bassoon, as well as an analysis of both Vivaldi's Concerto for Bassoon in C Major, RV 477 and Weber's Concerto in F major, op. 75. In analyzing these two concerti, I compare and contrast aspects of Baroque and Romantic concerti, including: structure, range, harmonies, articulations, ornamentation, and the general treatment of the bassoon. In examining these elements, I also use my understanding of the mechanics of the German-system bassoon to discuss performance issues.

## **Chapter 1: Background**

The first design for the bassoon was developed in the Baroque era; this instrument is referred to as the Baroque bassoon. Even though there are still some bassoonists using Baroque bassoons for period performances, the Baroque bassoon was found to be inefficient due to its

crude and sparse keywork, causing it to undergo several developments between the Baroque and Romantic era. This led to what is known as the modern German-system bassoon.

Before discussing the differences between Romantic bassoon concerti and Baroque bassoon concerti, I will explain the structural differences between German and Baroque bassoons. Figure 1 and Figure 2 presents the basic mechanical differences between the two types of bassoons.



Figure 1: German-System bassoon.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Grove Music Online, s.v. "Bassoon," by William Waterhouse, accessed April 7, 2016, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.proxy.bsu.edu/>.

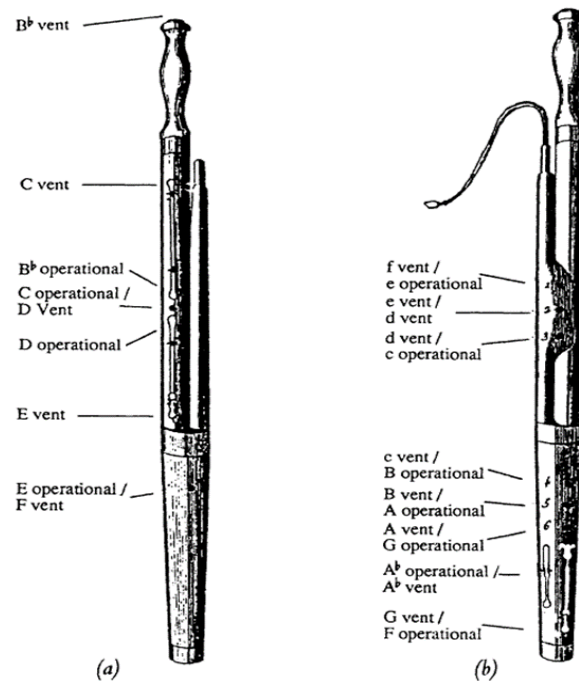


Figure 2: Baroque bassoon.<sup>2</sup>

Use of the Baroque bassoon creates many issues when playing Vivaldi's Bassoon Concerto in C Major. The key placements and fingerings are not convenient on a Baroque bassoon because of the sparsity of key work and the placement of the many open tone-holes. Even though there are some bassoonists who still play Baroque pieces on the Baroque bassoon, these performers are not able to achieve the same quality of sound as they would using a modern, German bassoon.<sup>3</sup> Most composers who wrote for the bassoon between the late Classical period and the Twenty-first century intended for the music to be played on a German bassoon. Most modern-day bassoonists prefer to play a German-system bassoon for any period piece because of the many advantages it offers.

<sup>2</sup> Paul White, "Early Bassoon Fingering Charts," *The Galpin Society Journal* 43 (1990): 70.

<sup>3</sup> William G. Spencer, *The Art of Bassoon Playing* (Evanston, Illinois: Alfred Music, 1969): 22.

As illustrated by the Figures 1 and 2, the German-system bassoon and Baroque bassoon have some obvious physical differences. The most apparent of these changes is the addition of keywork in the former. This change gradually caused the fingering system to grow more complex, but allowed for a greater range, more precise intonation, and a greater dynamic flexibility.<sup>4</sup> Noting the improvements to the instrument, composers worried less about the technical limitations of the instrument and instead began to focus on more melodic writing with increased technical involvement. Another key difference between the bassoons of the two eras is the reed. The Baroque bassoon's reed is bigger with a larger tip opening, and because it takes more air to produce sound, it generates a certain amount of buzz in the tone, resulting in a dark, covered quality to the sound.<sup>5</sup> The German-system bassoon's reed, however, offers a brighter, clear sound.

## **Chapter 2: A Brief Summary of Bassoon Technique in Both Concerti**

There are some books that offer clear ideas about bassoon technique and discuss how the German bassoon can be used to convincingly play a Baroque period piece. There are also articles that discuss how the mechanics and sound of the Baroque bassoon differ from the German bassoon.

Archie Camden's book *Bassoon Technique* is divided into ten sections. The main sections used for my research are the first, second, fourth and eighth sections, which all present a clear idea of the bassoon's structure as well as other important aspects regarding the bassoon.

In the first section, the author discusses the various advantages of the bassoon over other instruments. One such advantage is the larger range that the bassoon has over that of the oboe,

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<sup>4</sup> James Kopp, *The Bassoon*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 2012): 16.

<sup>5</sup> Homer C. Pence, *Teacher's Guide to the Bassoon* (Elkhart, Indiana: Selmer, 1963): 24.

which allows the bassoon to play in a wider registers with more variety of tone color. This section also details the bassoon's long history throughout the different musical eras. He also states that in the modern period, there are two different kinds of bassoon: the French bassoon and German bassoon.<sup>6</sup>

In the second section, Camden discusses bassoon technique. Camden mentions that, when playing bassoon, one requires a precise fingering for each note. Because some notes on the bassoon can be achieved through more than one fingering, the fingering used may be dependent on the musical context.<sup>7</sup> Also, the author provides many pictures to show the various levels of complexity for the fingerings. He also focuses on which pitches can make use of simplified fingering, particularly in extreme tempos.

### **Chapter 3: Introduction of Baroque Concerto and Romantic Concerto**

Vivaldi composed the Concerto for Bassoon in C major, RV 447 in the Baroque style. Within this style, arpeggiation was common within the melodic writing. Many performers add passing tones or grace notes to each arpeggiated chord; this is known as ornamentation, which can help make the music carry a more personal sense of interpretation. Also in this period, composers did not provide very clear and lyrical melodies, as compared to music written in the Romantic style. Most Baroque melodies are hidden in the scales and arpeggios that tend to outline the structural harmonies. There are many challenges for bassoonists when performing a Baroque piece. Among these challenges are issues regarding range, harmonic figurations, articulations, and ornamentation.

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<sup>6</sup> Archie Camden, *Bassoon Technique* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962): 1-4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-18.

Vivaldi's Concerto in C major, RV 447 contains three movements, which follows the traditional pattern of fast, slow and fast. The solo section in the first movement begins after a brief orchestral tutti. In this movement, all of the solo lines are based on harmonic chords and scales. As seen in Figure 3, Vivaldi uses a sequence of six chords which are C, G, C, G, C and D to build melody at the beginning. Because Baroque music most often has a clear harmonic structure, most of the melodies are built through this structure based on chordal arpeggiation, although not all of the pitches included would be considered primary melodic material. In these two measures, the melody should consist of the upper notes. The lower notes are not part of melody.



Figure 3. Vivaldi Bassoon Concerto in C Major, RV 477, mvt. 1, mm. 12-13.

There are many challenges in playing a Vivaldi concerto. As illustrated in Figure 4, there are three trills from A to B. The challenge for this trill is to switch the left- and right-hand fingering. The G must have an open half hole in the left hand but the B and A do not. Keeping the pitch and tone quality consistent when switching the half hole is a challenge for bassoonists.



Figure 4. Vivaldi Bassoon Concerto in C Major, RV 477, mvt. 1, mm. 17-18.

The second melody in the first movement is shown in Figure 5. Vivaldi uses a progression of six chords, which are A, F, B, E, A and F. In this large bassoon solo section, the challenge for the player is to find out how the melody is presented within the extensive figuration. In this section, each chord changes clearly. The new chord begins with a stepwise descent before leaping to a higher register. A harmonic analysis will help determine the most important pitches to the melody. In an A-minor chord, the important notes are C, E, and A. The first C must be played very strongly to pass to the low A because the two notes are in the A chord. Then, there are a few leaps from E to C, E to B, and from B back to E. In this section, the most important note is E because it is part the A chord. By looking at this solo section in its entirety, the main notes of the melody should be the first, third and top note of each figure.



Figure 5. Vivaldi Bassoon Concerto in C Major, RV 477, mvt. 1, mm. 32-34.

Vivaldi composed the second part of this solo in a similar style to the previous section; the melody is hidden in these chords. As shown in Figure 6, the chord progression includes A, D, E, A, A, D, B, G, A, F sharp, G, E, F sharp, D sharp, E, and A. As mentioned earlier, the melody is created by the main notes in each chord. While the figuration may appear to be simple, there is a big challenge here for the bassoonist, namely technique and breathing. This melody is over twelve measures, and each of the notes should be articulated. Typically, a twelve-measure phrase is not very long, but twelve measures with leaps and consistent tonguing may prove to be a struggle for the performer. When I perform this piece, I acknowledge that the few places to



breathe may not be enough for me, especially if I am to sustain my tone to the end. I may have to play a slightly faster tempo than I would normally select in order to make the phrasing work for me.

The technique used to play this passage is another challenge for bassoonists. When playing notes on the German-system bassoon, the player has to use the left thumb to flick the appropriate register key in order to cleanly produce the higher pitch. This can help the upper note speak clearly and to sound at an appropriate volume. The left thumb is also essential for closing the whisper key for the lower notes, thus allowing the lower pitches to speak clearly without cracking. When playing the solo, switching between the various flick keys and the whisper key involves rapid, large motions by the thumb. Because of this, it is difficult to ensure that the thumb motion is not late, otherwise pitches may crack.



Figure 6. Vivaldi Bassoon Concerto in C Major, RV 477, mvt. 1, mm. 17.

Vivaldi uses a lot of triple rhythms before concluding the first movement. This section has a wide range due to the frequent leaps covering more than an octave. As seen in Figure 7,

these octave displacements create clearer phrases in comparison with the rest of the piece because the harmonic figuration and melody are separated by register. However, the section is difficult for the performer to play because of the rapid arching figures and hard rhythms in these varying registers. Here, the melody starts at a *pianissimo* dynamic and grows to a *fortissimo* dynamic.



Figure 7. Vivaldi Bassoon Concerto in C Major, RV 477, mvt. 1, mm. 62-72.

In the second movement, Vivaldi composed a beautiful lyrical melody. As we can see in Figure 8, this movement is not very long, but it contains many interesting colors. The true interest comes from the repeated binary structure, wherein each section is repeated. This repetition allows the performer to alter dynamics and add ornamentation on repeats. The main chord progression within this movement involves the C, to its dominant, G. Although there are a few other chords involved, the tonic-dominant relationship is the most prevalent.

In the Baroque period, performers typically added ornamentation throughout repeated sections. This characteristic of the Baroque period helped give the piece a sense of individual

musicality through personal additions to the music. For example, during the first repeat, I like to add many grace notes and passing notes at the C and G chords, to make the ascending melody sound more connected. Also, on a repeat, one can consider holding the longer notes longer than they are written to provide more contrast between the first and second time through. While the Baroque era allows for more ornamentation at the performer's discretion, later composers like Weber wrote more precisely what they wanted in the music with the intention that the music would not be so altered by the performers.



Figure 8. Vivaldi Bassoon Concerto in C Major, RV 477, mvt. 2.

Weber's Bassoon concerto in F major, op. 75 contains many challenges for the bassoonist that need to be prepared and practiced prior to performance. Weber composed the concerto in

1811, so it includes Classical-style harmonies juxtaposed with Romantic-style melodies. These melodies are characterized by the use of the bassoon's higher tessitura, and the use of long phrase structures within the slow movements. Weber utilizes the Classical three-movement, fast-slow-fast, concerto form. The basic key structure for these three movements is F major in the first movement, B-flat major in the second movement, and F major in the third movement.

The first movement is in sonata form. Weber introduces the main theme, which is a half note and a dotted eighth note followed by sixteenth note pattern, as seen in Figure 9. This theme is manipulated and varied throughout the entire movement. There are many challenges when playing this piece. For example, from measure 80 to 116, there are very few rests written for the soloist, which makes breathing a challenge. The melody also has a large range and demands clear and precise staccato articulation. The articulation in this section is not always played exactly as it is written, as the bassoonist often adjusts articulations to convey the performers own personal sense of phrasing.



Figure 9. Weber Bassoon Concerto in F major, op. 75, mvt. 1, mm. 41-42.

As shown in Figure 10, there are two measures that show a leap from the low register to the extreme high register for four notes; this occurs in both the exposition and recapitulation. By looking at the complete score, one can see that the orchestra has a rest during this big leap, which leaves no room for error. This is a challenge for bassoonists because the transition from the low register to the upper register is difficult to achieve due to the necessary changes in embouchure and air speed. The lower notes require more air; performers have to make their lips very relaxed

and need an open oral cavity. However, the higher notes need more air support and a more supported embouchure. Usually, the higher notes are more difficult to project because performers might bite down on the reed, causing the reed opening to become very small. These higher notes will not speak appropriately or will not speak at all if the performer does this; additionally, this embouchure tightness can cause pitch problems, often causing these pitches to go sharp.



Figure 10. Weber Bassoon Concerto in F major, op. 75, mvt. 1, m. 113 (left) and m. 232 (right).

In the second movement, the bassoon solo begins by outlining a B-flat major chord. Seen in Figure 11, Weber uses the high range of the bassoon, following the compositional tradition of reserving the upper range for lyrical melodic writing. The bassoon solo starts a high F on the downbeat, marked *piano*. It is essential that the performer has complete control over the opening pitch to avoid intonation issues and an abrupt, heavy articulation. When I played this piece, I began this movement with no tongue. Some bassoonists articulate the first note, but this tends to start the movement at too high a dynamic level. The second movement is an entirely legato movement, reminiscent of an aria, therefore the melody should come from nothing.



Figure 11. Weber Bassoon Concerto in F major, op. 75, mvt. 2, mm 5-6.

In this movement, dynamics are of paramount importance; Weber indicates a dynamic range from *piano* to *fortissimo*. This wide dynamic range is characteristic of the Romantic style, which utilizes a broader range of volumes than Baroque and Classical music. In this movement, breathing poses a threat to the musical integrity of the phrase; performers must place their breaths in accordance to the phrase structure rather than when rests are present. In Figure 12, one can see the melody beginning with *mezzo forte*, building to *forte*, followed by a diminuendo. Each sixteenth note has a tenuto marking to make the first note seem stretched in comparison to the following figures. This compositional technique was uncommon during Weber's lifetime. Here, performers must ensure that the thirty-second notes do not rush from the tenuto sixteenth note.



Figure 12. Weber Bassoon Concerto in F major, op. 75, mvt. 2, mm 13-16.

Phrasing does not follow Baroque or Classical idioms within this movement. In early music, phrases are usually in symmetrical, four- or eight- measure groups lending a certain amount of clarity. However, Weber composed longer, asymmetrical phrases. In Figure 13, one can see that the rhythms and range are substantially different from Vivaldi's writing. Weber is using a standard, Romantic style of composition. The rests appear at different intervals, signaling the asymmetrical lengths of each phrase. Weber also varies the rhythmic subdivisions of the beat far more than Vivaldi did in such a short section of music. A final difference from this movement of the Weber concerto to Vivaldi's second movement is the issue of ornamentation; while

Vivaldi left ornamentation up to performers, Weber wrote the ornamentation into the music, leaving performers no opportunity to improvise.



Figure 13. Weber Bassoon Concerto in F major, op. 75, mvt. 2, mm 29-40.

By comparing these two concerti, one can see a clear distinction between the performance practice of Baroque music and early Romantic music. The compositional style of the Baroque consists of regular and symmetrical phrasing, and the composer provides the performers with freedom to personalize their performance through their own choice of ornamentation. In the early Romantic period, however, there is little opportunity for performers to add ornamentation. Instead, composers were more explicit in what they wanted regarding phrasing, dynamics, and ornamentation by writing exactly how they wanted the music to be played. Performing Vivaldi requires more investigation into the phrasing and requires the performer to provide more thought into how to ornament the pre-existing melodies, all while using dynamics and register to bring out these decisions. However, when performing Weber, bassoonists must recognize the need for greater variances in air support and performing the

music exactly as the composer intended it. This requires investigation into the asymmetric phrasing and the overall style presented by the composer.



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